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Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations: Special economic assistance to individual countries or regions

Emergency assistance to Montserrat

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report of the Secretary-General is submitted in response to General Assembly resolution 52/169 J of 16 December 1997 on emergency assistance to Montserrat. That resolution, *inter alia*, requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the progress made with respect to the relief and rehabilitation efforts of the country, following a series of eruptions of the Soufriere Hills volcano, and the support provided by relevant agencies of the United Nations system in that regard.

II. Background

A. General

2. Montserrat, a relatively small Caribbean island of 102 square kilometres with an original population of about 11,000 in early 1995, has been devastated by a series of violent eruptions and pyroclastic flows from the Soufriere Hills volcano. The island had already been hit by an earlier major disaster in 1989, in the shape of Hurricane Hugo, which caused extensive damage to over 90 per cent of housing. Following a successful period of reconstruction, increased seismic activity was recorded in the Soufriere Hills volcano in mid-1992, after several centuries of dormancy. A long phase of minor tremors then occurred in early 1995, followed by two major hurricanes (Louis and Marilyn) later in 1995. Those developments preceded the onset of full volcanic activity in July 1995. Further full-blown eruptions occurred on 25 June 1997.

3. On that date, pyroclastic flows from the Soufriere Hills volcano swept over an area of approximately 4 square kilometres on its eastern and northern flanks, killing 19 people and destroying 10 villages, with infrastructural damages estimated at US$ 1.5 million. That tragic event was only the forerunner to the continuing series of explosions which have destroyed or made inaccessible most of the southern part of the island. The area, densely populated and containing the economic, social and cultural heart of the country, included the scenic capital Plymouth, located on the volcano's western flank. The underdeveloped northern third of the island, however, is considered safe, and all remaining residents were evacuated to that safe zone, where disaster relief and resettlement operations have been concentrated since the onset of the disaster. Toxic ash, with its poorly understood long-term effects, constantly emits from the volcano. The Government's top priority in managing the volcanic disaster is to implement a sustainable development

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plan for northern Montserrat in a manner that would ensure better protection for the residents from the type of volcanic destruction experienced in the south.

B. Social and Economic

4. According to the preliminary results of a recent social survey of Montserrat, two thirds of the islanders have opted for evacuation since 1995. The current population has stabilized at about 3,500. Seventy-five per cent of households have had to relocate, many on more than one occasion. Over 50 per cent of all households with children are now headed by single parents, and 20 per cent of those households in shelters are exclusively composed of persons over 60 years of age. Health and education facilities have been severely disrupted. For the population as a whole, dislocation and disruption of families are not the only consequences of the disaster. Those effects have resulted in the longer-term dependency on food vouchers provided by Government and other relief agencies for daily subsistence. A large proportion of the population is also reliant on emergency shelter facilities, such as schools, churches and shared residential dwellings, for their housing needs. In turn, the normal functioning of these social facilities has been severely disrupted. Emergency health-care centres are currently under construction in the north, along with ongoing efforts in housing construction.

5. The majority of the country's original population has opted for evacuation to neighbouring islands in the Caribbean, with a small proportion having been offered residence in the United Kingdom. Regrettably, evacuation has resulted in the widespread separation of families and the collapse of the island's former social structure, with potentially grave social and economic consequences.

6. Since the June 1997 eruption, the availability of hard economic data for Montserrat has been limited. However, gross domestic product data for the country indicates an alarming drop of over 58 per cent in the period 1990–1996 (see table 1).

Table 1
Gross domestic product for Montserrat, 1988–1996

	1988	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*
GDP[a] at constant 1977 prices (Millions of EC$)[b]	48.0	50.7	61.4	46.9	46.4	47.0	47.0	43.4	35.7

Source: Caribbean Development Bank, annual economic report for Montserrat, 1992; and Caribbean Development Bank country data: Montserrat, February 1998.

[a] No gross national product figures are available for Montserrat.

[b] 2.7 EC$ = 1 US$.

7. Montserrat has been left with little capacity for domestic production. Before the crisis, while the north remained underdeveloped and sparsely populated, almost all agricultural, manufacturing, trade and tourism, as well as educational and cultural activities, were concentrated inside or within a few kilometres of Plymouth. After several episodes of evacuations to "buffer" zones in the centre and "safe" zones in the north, hard-hit businesses have been decimated and are in dire need of assistance. Substantive production activity on the island has virtually ceased. However, with the remaining population determined to stay, many small businesses from the south have rapidly readjusted to the situation by using make-shift premises in the north. Several homes in the north have also been converted into offices, shops and restaurants, further compounding the prevailing pressures on housing and shelter.

III. Actions taken

8. Since the start of the crisis, the United Nations resident coordinator system, under the leadership of the United Nations resident coordinator and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) resident representative based in Barbados, was mobilized to respond with emergency assistance to the country. Immediate relief measures were put in place through the concerted efforts of United Nations agencies present in the eastern Caribbean area, using their own resources and without recourse to the resources of the United Nations Emergency Coordinator. The World Health Organization/Pan American Health Organization undertook responsibility for the coordination

of medical supplies and for the financing of medical equipment and personnel made available in the immediate aftermath of the initial eruptions. The provision of safety equipment, vitamins, agricultural inputs and training in trauma relief was undertaken by The United Nations Children's Fund, while the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) provided its assistance for the rehabilitation of fisheries and agriculture, through UNDP. Montserrat is not a member of FAO.

9. Following the first volcanic eruptions in 1995, UNDP provided emergency resources of US$ 165,000 from its special programme resources (SPR) in support of the Government's efforts to cope with the crisis. Because of the immediate pressing need for emergency shelter, much of that sum was identified for use in an emergency housing programme to cater for the shelter needs of the displaced population relocated to the safe zone in the north of the island. The housing units are currently under construction in the "CARICOM Village" located in the north of the island. Disbursement of those resources has been continuing, and full construction of all units is expected to be completed shortly.

10. Apart from meeting the cost for the construction of housing units, UNDP has provided much needed technical support to the Government in the field of civil engineering. In collaboration with the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme, a civil engineer was recruited and assumed responsibilities in Montserrat in September 1997 to work in the area of physical planning. Over a period of six months, the specialist was part of the team working on a new physical development plan for northern Montserrat. He was assigned to the Physical Planning Unit, and advised the Government on policies pertaining to housing and human settlements. A replacement is currently being sought for the expert following his departure.

11. Through the collaborative efforts of the Government and the UNDP country office and following consultations with other development partners active in Montserrat, a country cooperation framework was prepared and presented to the UNDP/United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Executive Board for adoption at its third session in 1997. However, as a result of the rapidly evolving situation and the changing priorities following the June 1997 eruption, a request for postponement of its adoption was made to the Executive Board by UNDP.

12. The decision by the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board to postpone adoption of the country cooperation framework for Montserrat was accompanied by the Executive Board's endorsement of a request by UNDP for the provision of additional emergency and rehabilitation support to the country. The details of that support have been finalized by UNDP, in close consultations with the UNDP country office in Barbados and the Governments of Montserrat and the United Kingdom. It has been agreed that such assistance will focus, in the first instance, on providing support to the Government through technical assistance and capacity-building measures to deal with the many disaster management and resettlement challenges resulting from the crisis. That further assistance, which is being met from UNDP TRAC[1] 1.1.3 resources, will provide support to the Government, mainly in the area of capacity-building for disaster management and preparedness. The services of an international expert in disaster planning and management will be made available for a minimum period of one year to assist in all aspects of economic and social planning for disaster management. Discussions are also under way for the provision of additional technical expertise through the UNV programme, in close collaboration with the Department for International Development of the United Kingdom Government. In addition, targeted training in disaster management and preparedness will be provided by UNDP to officials from key government agencies.

13. In line with the importance attached by the United Nations system to the documenting and dissemination of lessons learnt in dealing with disasters, UNDP will provide the services of a consultant to assist in such a task for the future benefit of Montserrat and other small island developing States. The consultant will also be responsible for the preparation of an advocacy strategy for use by the Government of Montserrat in its attempt to secure further financial and technical support from all possible sources. The strategy is intended to serve the purpose of drawing greater attention to the country's plight.

14. The difficulties faced by UNDP in dealing with the emergency and rehabilitation support needs of Montserrat have stemmed to a great extent from the current net contributor country (NCC) status conferred to it at the start of the new programme cycle, which began in January 1997. In that way, Montserrat is a recipient of UNDP TRAC 1.1.1 and 1.1.2 resources only on a reimbursable basis. Access to other forms of emergency assistance, such as TRAC 1.1.3, is further constrained by the NCC status, and by the priority accorded to responding to the emergency needs of least developed and low-income countries globally, as well as by resource constraints affecting those sources. The Government of Montserrat has requested a review of the country's funding status with UNDP. That matter was presented to the annual Executive Board meeting in June

1998. It is expected that a final decision will be taken at the first regular session of the Executive Board in January 1999.

15. Moreover, appropriate action has been taken for a review of the current status of Montserrat and its designation as a hardship duty station during the September 1998 meeting of the International Civil Service Commission. That latter action, if granted, is expected to assist greatly with the recruitment and retention of international personnel to meet the capacity-building and other support needs of the country.

IV. Latest developments

16. With a reduction in the level of volcanic activity in recent months, the uncertainties engendered by the eruptions have eased to a certain extent. There are signs of a small but tangible increase in population levels, signalling the start of a significant new chapter in the country's post-emergency development. The Government is refocusing its priorities from disaster relief and resettlement to disaster prevention and sustainable development. A sustainable development plan for the period 1998 to 2002 is in the process of being finalized, using an integrated development planning approach and in consultation with various civil society organizations and international development partners. The plan has been prepared by the joint efforts of the Governments of the United Kingdom and Montserrat.

17. The main emphasis of the plan is on the development of the north of the island as the basis for the country's future economic, social and political advancement. The draft plan also concentrates on the reform of the public sector, the enhancement of the role of the private sector in economic development, and on provisions for the welfare of the population. Although the development of northern Montserrat remains a top priority, more attention will need to be paid to resettlement in the buffer zone, as well as to matters of the carrying capacity and other environmental considerations germane to a sustainable future for the island. Meanwhile, however, the threat of further volcanic eruptions has not abated, and scientists predict at least another two years of possible high-level activity.

18. Montserrat's dependence on United Kingdom financial support has been further increased by the significant shortfalls in the Government's fiscal revenue. The country's NCC status, small population size and legal status with the United Kingdom, moreover, have all constrained efforts by UNDP over the last 12 months to allocate resources in excess of the limited allocations that have already been made from SPR and TRAC 1.1.3 funding.

19. Within this very limited financial context, it is envisaged that in the short term, UNDP will support the Government in the refinement of the new sustainable development plan. In addition, a number of key areas of intervention have been identified that could form part of a possible future programme of cooperation between UNDP and the Government in the medium term, including the important element of public sector reform identified in the sustainable development plan, along with microenterprise development and sustainable livelihoods, environmental management, and continued assistance with the mobilization and coordination of external support. In view of its financial limitations, emphasis will have to be placed by UNDP, as the main United Nations system partner of the Government, on providing access for the country to the technical expertise and knowledge available throughout the United Nations system in a future cooperation programme.

V. Recommendations

20. Montserrat has an existing cooperation agreement with UNDP, which has traditionally been seen by the country as an important development partner. Since the postponement of the adoption of the new country cooperation framework by the UNDP/UNFPA Executive Board in 1997, preliminary discussions were held with a view to finalizing a new policy framework between UNDP and Government. It is recommended that those discussions be finalized with the objective of concluding a country cooperation framework that would emphasize agreed support to be provided by UNDP, in collaboration with other agencies of the United Nations system, as well as relevant bilateral and multilateral partners, for the implementation of the country's sustainable development plan. Wherever possible, avenues should be explored for filling any existing resource gaps in order to guarantee the success of the country's rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts.

Notes

[1] Target for resource assignment against the core